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National News

Gypsies attack 'racist' Straw over ban on fair

Audrey Gillan

British Gypsies will accuse the home secretary of racism in the high court this morning when they seek a judicial review of his decision to sign an order banning their annual horse fair in the Kent village of Horsmonden.

The Gypsy Council, the National Romany Rights Association and Liberty, the civil liberties group, will claim today that a ban on the fair, one of the most important events in the Gypsy calendar, is unreasonable and possibly discriminatory, saying there is no good reason why the historic event should be cancelled.

Lawyers will claim that the home secretary, Jack Straw, has not taken into account all the issues involved in the case. They will also point out that the order infringes the right to freedom of assembly, which is set to be enshrined in the European convention on human rights next month.

The Gypsy Council will challenge the order made under section 14a of the 1986 public order act, and will cite remarks made by Mr Straw about travellers in an interview with BBC Radio West Midlands last year, in which he said: "Many of these so-called travellers seem to think that it is perfectly OK for them to cause mayhem in an area, to

go burgling, thieving, breaking into vehicles, causing all kinds of trouble, including defecating in the doorways of firms and so on, and getting away with it.

"Travellers have traded on the sentiment, they have masqueraded as law-abiding Gypsies, when many of them are not."

The home secretary gave his consent to allow Tonbridge Wells borough council to stop "trespassory assembly" on the village green over the coming weekend after the Horsmonden parish council had decided to stop the fair because it had "grown too big".

Gypsies claim that the decision to ban the fair, which they say is more than 400 years old, is racial in nature and deprives them of their culture and heritage.

On the second Sunday in September, the village green in Horsmonden becomes the site for horse trading and the selling of traditional Gypsy finery, such as china, linen and lace. The fair was used to celebrate the end of the hop-picking season, and a means of catching up with family and friends.

The green has been closed for the weekend but Gypsies plan to have a parade through the village and hundreds are expected to turn up to protest against the decision.

Grattan Puxon, spokesman

for the Gypsy Council, said: "Horsmonden was mentioned as early as the 12th century by horse traders and horse breeders."

Neil Robins, chairman of Horsmonden parish council, disputes the heritage and age of the horse fair, saying: "Historically there has always been a bone of contention between ourselves and the Romanies as to how far it goes back".

Mr Robins says the festival was for hop-pickers who came to the area from east London. He claims there was only a very small element of horse trading but that it has grown with the attraction of Romanies to the fair.

"It has become like a glorified boot sale with lots of traders and horse boxes turning up with horses," he said, adding that there had been problems with traffic and horses being raced up one-way streets the wrong way. In April, the parish council decided by a majority to ban the event.

Eddie Hersey and his wife Susanna, who are Gypsies and have lived in Horsmonden for 23 years, believe that a tradition has been taken away from them. They have attended the event every year and plan a family party at the weekend.

Special report at
www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/racism